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Hoosier Writing Workshop 2011

Fountain Pens and Freedom

I had two high school teachers who worked hard to help me to become a better writer. Mr. Shaner taught English 11. He introduced and reinforced the technical aspects of writing in a severe and inflexible environment where he insisted that school rules, writing rules, and “Shaner” rules be followed to the letter. Mrs. Boyer was my creative writing teacher. Her classroom, on the other hand, was a safe place to express myself without fear of criticism and unnecessary correction. Do not get me wrong, I do appreciate Mr. Shaner’s efforts. He taught me a love for words and word meanings. He helped me discover that words can be powerful tools that help us plead our case or acquire something that we passionately desire or they can be road bombs on the road called life if spoken too harshly or without thought.

We began each day in Mr. Shaner’s class receiving 25 new spelling/vocabulary words. As soon as the bell to dismiss class rang and the first student for the next period entered, Mr. Shaner began reading the list for the day; “albeit…..alliance…..altruistic…..” We always knew who had Shaner each period because we would see them running through the hall to get to class before he had the chance to get too far down the list. After reading the list of new words, Mr. Shaner would ask the students to go around the room, read a word, and then spell the word. If we spelled our word incorrectly or failed to know our word because we had not arrived in class early enough to hear the entire list, we would receive an “E” in spelling for the day!

Public humiliation was an important part of this game for Mr. Shaner. If I would spell my new spelling word incorrectly, Mr. Shaner would very dramatically say, “Oh Miss Shultz, today is certainly a wonderful day because nothing gives me more pleasure than putting an “EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE” into the grade book and you’ve just accommodated me so nicely.” He was so smug and nasty and I hated him! But after spelling, defining, and using those words in assigned writings, my vocabulary improved tremendously.

Mr. Shaner also required perfection in writing. All writing in his class had to be done with an old fashioned fountain pen; no exception. If I turned in a paper written in ballpoint pen, he would throw it in the trash and enter an “E” in the grade book for that assignment. My papers were always returned to me with so many red marks (made with a red ink fountain pen of course) that it was difficult to read what I had written. Punctuation rules, capitalization rules, grammar rules, were to be followed to the letter. Creativity was not important; following the rules was critical!

Mrs. Boyer, one of my senior English teachers, on the other hand, was the polar opposite of Mr. Shaner. Senior English consisted of two one-semester classes. We were able to choose from an array of offerings. I chose creative writing and modern novel. Mrs. Boyer taught creative writing. It was she who allowed me the freedom to express myself.

Mrs. Boyer was the only high school teacher I had who allowed us many freedoms that no other teachers would. She even let us use the bathroom pass without asking! It made me feel so grown up being allowed to decide if I needed to use the bathroom or not. That seems so silly now, but it was more than that; it set a tone in her classroom of mutual respect. Silly things like not being required to ask permission to use the restroom, being able to talk without raising our hands, and not having assigned seats allowed us to quickly respect and trust Mrs. Boyer.

I have to admit that learning the mechanics of writing from Mr. Shaner did help me with many of the writing assignments in Mrs. Boyer’s class, but from day one, she offered us many opportunities to just write and not worry about “rules.” For example, we were expected to write journal entries every day. These entries were our exit tickets out of class each day. They were not graded, but Mrs. Boyer read our entries and then put a red check mark at the top of the page. Many times she wrote little comments like, “Oh wow, I never knew this about you! I would love to learn how to ride a horse.” These little comments made me feel as though she cared about me; liked me; appreciated me.

I found it odd at first, that in a creative writing class we did a lot of reading. We read many styles of poetry both modern and classic. We also read essays, letters, short stories, and text. We learned a little about some of her favorite authors which helped us understand why they wrote the things they wrote and chose a particular style of writing. Then we did some personal reflection in an attempt to help us decide what our style of writing might be and what we might like to write about.

I especially loved our unit study on poetry. I enjoyed so much listening to Mrs. Boyer read some of her favorite poems to us. Her voice was light and airy; she was expressive and obviously moved by some of the selections she had chosen. I had never looked at poetry in the light that Mrs. Boyer cast on it. I found a love for reading and writing poetry in Mrs. Boyer’s class. I’ve continue to write poetry every now and then when I need to put into words feeling that I may never share with anyone else but somehow seem important enough that they need to be said.

Little did I know how important my time spent with Mr. Shaner and Mrs. Boyer would be. Thanks to Mrs. Boyer, I still enjoy writing the occasional poem and keeping a daily journal. While studying for my degree at IIUPUI, I was required to write endless papers on which I received good marks thanks to the technical writing training I received from Mr. Shaner. Writing has been an important element that continues to be woven in and out of my life. Looking closely, I see strong threads of writing techniques woven by Mr. Shaner and fun, bright, and colorful threads woven by Mrs. Boyer.